Dany Carnassale

Non-heteronormative masculinities and religious attitudes of Senegalese migrants living in Italy

Abstract
The article explores the experiences of some Senegalese Muslim men who have sexual experiences with other men. Drawing on research that took place in some selected urban areas in Senegal and in Northern Italy, I highlight the flexible strategies that Senegalese men enact to maintain or challenge their transnational image of breadwinners living abroad, expressing their intimacy in safe ways while taking into account the dominant social and religious expectations. The article questions whether non-heteronormative genders and sexualities may also influence the engagement in local and transnational networks. Conclusions underline the agency expressed by these highly mobile migrants in managing their bonds and sense of belonging through borders and challenge some dominant discourses that consider non-heteronormative sexualities and religious beliefs inevitably antithetical.
Keywords: Senegal, heteronormativity, Italy, homosexuality, migration

Dany Carnassale, Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Dorsoduro 3484/D, Calle Contarini, Venice, 30123 – Italy (IT). dany.carnassale@unive.it.
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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the experiences of Senegalese male cisgender[1] migrants who express their sexual attraction towards other men and perform non-heteronormative models of masculinity. The research sheds light on their experiences of mobility between Italy and Senegal. I discuss the complex and creative methods that Senegalese migrant men employ to maintain or redefine significant social bonds and belongings through their mobility experiences. I describe also how these migrants creatively shape their religious beliefs and sense of belonging to their country of origin, the Senegalese community abroad and their compatriots left behind.

In their narratives, these men report many challenges and experiences regarding gender, generation, class and national border crossings. I argue that it is not correct to frame their subjectivities and migratory trajectories into boxes that are commonly perceived as mutually exclusive options: being gay/bisexual or religious, being a married heterosexual father or a single gay man, being in touch with compatriots or avoiding them completely. On the contrary, I highlight how there can be a shift from one display or performance to another, without losing identity coherence and relevant social bonds. I offer examples of the ambivalent role of social ties both in Senegal and Italy, especially considering the intersections of unforeseen sexualities and religious viewpoints.

Historically, there has been the issue of reluctance encountered in some informants who perceive gender and sexuality as taboo or intimate topics, that should not be openly discussed. In other cases, problems and bias have emerged from the local authorities or academic institutions (Tamale, 2011), discouraging participants from becoming involved in research projects focusing on these issues. From an analytical perspective, some scholars have suggested that the construction of subjectivities does not necessarily correspond to how genders and sexualities have been conceptualized in Euro-American contexts and perspectives (Boellstorff, 2007; Epprecht, 2008). Considering all these challenges, this article demonstrates that ethnography is probably the most suitable research method for navigating these complex issues.

To facilitate the reader's understanding, in the next paragraph I present a brief overview of gender and migration studies in relation to Senegalese migrations. I go on to illustrate some background information about the interplay of gender and sexuality in Senegal, and the role of gender and religion in migratory trajectories of Senegalese migrants to Italy. I then propose a methodology section in which I reflect on my positionality and the importance of adopting an ethnographic approach when a study concerns sensitive topics. The final paragraphs are based on the fieldwork; results are then critically discussed with some final remarks.

[1] Cisgender people are individuals who accept and conform to the gender assigned at birth. This information implies that the research did not involve trans men, who have transitioned to masculine identities during their life.

2. Gender, migration and religion in the case of Senegalese migrants

According to the literature concerning Senegalese migrants – which is strongly influenced by transnational perspectives (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1992; Basch *et al.*, 1994; Grillo *et al.*, 2000; Grillo, 2007; Levitt, Jaworsky, 2007) – Senegalese people are transnational agents able to manage social and religious bonds across national borders even after settling abroad (Schmidt di Friedberg, 1994; Carter, 1997; Riccio, 2007; Diop, 2008; Dia, 2013; Fall, 2017). Being abroad leads to increased popularity, especially among young men of different social classes and backgrounds (Melly, 2011; Prothmann, 2017), configuring the migratory experiences as an initiation ritual to adulthood (Prothmann, 2017).

More recently, a gendered perspective on migratory trajectories of Senegalese people living in Italy (Sinatti, 2014; Cavatorta, 2018) offered further examples of how mobilities, gender roles and religious practices co-construct one another through migratory experiences. These ethnographies show how ideals associated with intergenerational relations, as well as femininity and masculinity, can be achieved and redefined through a migratory experience. For instance, Prothmann (2017) highlights the potential link between masculinity and the experience of taking the risk of settling elsewhere. On the contrary, working and living conditions may have a negative influence on how their genders are represented, perceived and performed, both locally and transnationally.

The broader multidisciplinary research field of gender and migration studies remained heteronormative for a long time (Luibhéid, 2004; Mai, King, 2009), neglecting the experiences of migrants attracted to people of their own gender, as well as those proposing alternative ways to shape and perform their gender (Camminga, 2018). Similarly, the topic of sexuality was for a long time neglected and considered a troublesome field of research in social sciences (Boellstorff, 2007; Spronk, 2014), overlooking the religious practices of non-heterosexual people in certain African contexts (Van Klinken, Chitando, 2016) as well as in migratory trajectories (Peumans, 2014; 2016). In this emerging field, some scholars (Yip, Nynäs, 2012; Giametta, 2014; Peumans, 2014; 2016) point to the importance of not framing religion and non-heteronormative sexualities as opposing categories, as there are individuals who are able to reconcile faith, gender and sexuality. Moreover, they problematize a binary model that associates «progress» and «emancipation» with the Global North and «backwardness» and «persecution» with the Global South[2].

What ought to be explored in greater depth in the case of Senegalese mobilities is the heterogeneity of migratory paths and the experiences of Senegalese individuals who do not conform to the dominant models of masculinity and femininity. Useful insights can be obtained by looking at the experiences of

[2] Eboko and Awondo (2013) offer an example of another European context and another national community: Cameroonian gay and bisexual men living in France tend to redefine their gender expression in the migratory context and avoid alternative models on their return because of the restrictive attitudes expressed by the Catholic Church in Cameroon (Awondo *et al.*, 2012).

those who do not necessarily express their sexuality according to the religious normative views considered coherent with their ascribed age, status and gender. We may reflect on whether non-heteronormative sexuality may facilitate or endanger the position that Senegalese migrants occupy within the transnational arena and whether they may equally benefit from the support provided by compatriots living abroad.

3. Religious discourses on gender and sexuality in the context of Senegal

Senegal obtained its independence from France in 1960 and is considered one of the most politically peaceful countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Officially, Senegal is a secular state with a Muslim-majority population. Many scholars have commented on the role of charismatic religious leaders (called *marabouts*), not only in Senegal, but also for many Senegalese migrants living abroad (Cruise O'Brien, 1971). They argue that in present-day Senegal, religious leaders may have an important role during political elections (Piga, 2013). Whereas most of the Senegalese population (approximately 95%) identifies as Muslim, it is important to remember that Christian minorities are respected both by the law and in everyday social practices (Piga, 2013). However, as noted by Broqua (2017) and Mbaye (2018), since the late 1980s the influence of some religious associations (for instance the vocal NGO Djamra) has increased in many contexts, providing scapegoats for the long-term economic and social crisis. The main targets are homosexuals, prostitutes and drug addicts. This aspect is particularly relevant, because it demonstrates that the prevailing nationalist and religious views in Senegal are frequently constructed through the exclusion of specific individuals that are considered outlaws (Mbaye, 2018).

To better understand how genders and sexualities are performed through the experiences of migration and mobility, as well as how they are shaped and influenced by religious backgrounds and affiliations, it is vital to examine their political and social construction in Senegal (Biaya, 2001; Hannaford, Foley, 2015). During the last decades, scholars have focused on gender issues in Senegal, especially in relation to the broader issue of kinship (Diop, 1985; Bop, 2005; Dial, 2008; Neveu Kringelbach, 2013), gradually introducing the topic of non-heteronormative sexualities and how they may challenge heteronormativity in Senegal (Niang *et al.*, 2003; M'Baye, 2013; Gning, 2013; Mbaye 2018). This literature remarks that, despite the fact that many official discourses constantly reaffirm social gendered roles and intergenerational responsibilities, institutional actors and religious leaders are aware of the differences existing between official public statements and unofficial private practices (Foley, Drame, 2013). For instance, Fouquet (2014) and Hannaford and Foley (2015) highlighted how young men and women living in Senegalese urban areas express their sexuality also before marriage, even though these practices are rarely admitted because of the risks of social stigmatization (Van Eerdewijk, 2009).

These cases offer an example of how social condemnation for «immoral acts» has a gendered dimension, because the sexuality of youths is regu-

lated through a strong social control and moralized rhetoric (van Eerdewijk, 2009; Foley, 2017). Considering that the condemnation of «improper» forms of gender and sexual expressions regularly happens for heterosexual individuals and couples, the social attitude towards non-heteronormative masculinities and femininities and homoerotic acts can be even more violent (Niang *et al.*, 2003). In the Wolof language, a man having sex with another man is called *goorjigeen*, that literally means «manwoman»: this person is frequently considered the opposite of «positive» models of masculinity, like for instance the *lamb* athlete, the *marabout* or the *borom k r* (the good head of the household). Frequently, dominant rhetoric relies on religious discourses that state that Islamic values and Senegalese culture are endangered by the affirmation of alternative social behaviours and lifestyles frequently associated with *toubabs* (white people, or in a broader sense «Western» or «Westernized» individuals). However, M'Baye (2013) explained that prior to independence, in Senegal there was relative tolerance of people performing non-heteronormative masculinities and potentially involved in homoerotic acts. According to witnesses from the colonial period, prejudices towards these people came mainly from Western explorers and scholars, rather than from the local religious authorities and population (M'Baye, 2013). Broqua (2017) confirmed that the conflation of alternative models of masculinity expressed by *goorjigeen* with homosexuality can be considered a recent phenomenon.

Many scholars agree that social and political attitudes have changed for the worse especially during the last two decades, once people practising sex with a person of the same sex gained visibility and started to be stigmatized without big differences in terms of gender, generation, class, ethnic background or religion (Gning, 2014). This restrictive attitude is frequently connected to the legal framework, due to the existence of a law that criminalizes homoerotic acts with a fine (up to 1.5 million of FCFA) and jail detention (up to five years) for «improper or unnatural act with a person of the same sex»[3].

Going beyond a mere legal overview of the topic, same-sex sexualities are currently a source of moral panic and provoke negative reactions both in the mass media and the public sphere, especially when homoerotic acts and same-sex relationships involve two men. From 2008 to this day, several homo/bi/transphobic acts have received international attention, including anti-LGBTQI marches and protests, jail detentions and exhumation of the dead bodies of supposed homosexuals (Gning, 2013). These episodes may have an impact on the process of subjectivation of people performing non-heteronormative sexualities. Some may arrive to construct their identity through a process of disidentification from a stigmatizing society (Mbaye, 2018). Consequently, the intimate lives of Senegalese men who contravene the model of «hegemonic masculinity» (Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005) remain relatively invisible or creatively adapted to specific contexts.

This phenomenon does not imply that Senegalese individuals interested in having romantic or sexual experiences with people of the same sex are isolated,

[3] Article 319 of the Senegalese penal code.

completely subjugated and necessarily persecuted. Gning (2014) and Mbaye (2018) expanded the previous data initially collected by Niang and his colleagues (2002; 2003) showing that some people secretly organize themselves in associations and NGOs in which they practise mutual support to reduce the effect of isolation and social stigmatization. Mbaye (2018) mentions that many activists consider themselves religious believers. They conceive the possibility of not practising sex with other men in the future, but not the idea of abandoning their religion. Associations active in promoting support and socialization are not officially registered for what they concretely do. Many respondents who participated in various past research projects stress the importance of acting in line with the local cultural code of *sutura* (discretion). This term represents the ability to navigate different contexts in different ways, acknowledging the importance of respecting socio-cultural norms and religious values (Gning, 2013; Oudenhuijsen, 2021). It implies also the preference for doing something secretly, instead of talking about it publicly. Apparently, following the principle of *sutura* may guarantee the expression of gender and sexual alternatives without risking the social stigmatization fed by the dominant cultural and religious viewpoints. This requires that associations composed of, or working with self-identified MSM (men having sex with other men) do not express the same claims of other international organisations, instead they act using other strategies and tactics: supporting a stigmatized minority (including health support) instead of organizing political actions aimed at challenging society's negative attitudes towards homo/bi/transexuality. Through these complex practices, the process of identification as Muslim MSM emerges between visibility and invisibility (Mbaye, 2018). However, this growing literature does not mention the situation of MSM living abroad, whether or not they contribute somehow to these local movements and whether they have similar or different experiences from those living in Senegal.

4. Gender and religion in Senegalese mobility experiences to Italy

According to recent statistics provided by the Italian national *dossier* of migrations (Idos, 2020), Senegalese migrants represent the second community from sub-Saharan Africa settled in Italy and approximately 74% of these individuals are men. Quantitative data state that Senegalese mobilities to Italy continue to be a predominantly male-centred experience, even though it is impossible to neglect the rise in the percentage of women since the beginning of this century (Riccio, 2008). However, the deterioration of working and living conditions due to the economic crisis has convinced some Senegalese migrants living in Italy to move elsewhere or to return to their home country (Cavatorta, 2018). Yet this scenario does not compromise the image of the successful migrant living abroad (Melly, 2011; Hannaford, 2016), nor the belief that migration may represent a unique chance to improve social status and meet social expectations (Hannaford, 2016; Prothmann, 2017).

Looking at migratory trajectories from the perspective of religious beliefs and practices leads to other considerations. For instance, Riccio (2007) remarked that while Senegalese migrants living in Italy have been commonly labelled with the derogatory expression *vu cumprà* – people carrying out the informal activity of selling fancy goods in the streets as a temporary strategy of survival to cope with a period of unemployment or lack of regular legal status[4] – they consider themselves as *modou modou* or *goor-goorlu,* two Wolof expressions that describe how they cope with harsh working/living conditions through a positive cultural re-interpretation of their experiences (Riccio, 2007; Prothmann, 2017). After all, their trajectories are a continuation of that experienced during the colonial period by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba (the founder of the Muslim brotherhood «*Muridiyya*», particularly popular both in Senegal and its diaspora). His exile was largely considered an opportunity to demonstrate the strength of his faith, just as some migrants may express resistance and resilience during the challenges encountered during their lives abroad.

Regarding religious practices, Schmidt di Friedberg (1994) and Carter (1997) illustrated what it means to be part of a Muslim minority living in Italy, focussing on the experience of religious associations, which combine religious vitality, material mutual assistance, and community solidarity. According to prevailing representations, this internal solidarity reproduces the Senegalese moral principle of *teranga* (hospitality) within the new context (Riley, 2019)[5]. This implies that Senegalese networks in Italy fulfil a pivotal role in relocation, providing information and material assistance for newcomers, as well as organizing social meetings and cultural events that could be relevant both emotionally and symbolically. According to prevailing narratives, Senegalese men and women who have migrated abroad love to profess their common belonging to Islam and tend to help each other beyond these religious affiliations.

As already remarked by Sinatti (2014), international migration can also offer the chance to challenge or reconfigure gendered positionalities. Sometimes the adaptation of gender identity and sexuality can be the consequence of negative aspects deeply linked to resettlement experiences (living in precarious spaces, experimenting extreme poverty, etc.), other times it can be the result of experiments and new opportunities discovered abroad. Because moving abroad is not simply an individual decision, but an experience involving family members and compatriots left behind (Diop, 2008; Mondain *et al.*, 2013), it could be crucial to also look at the gendered dimension of these international migration experiences and understand whether stigmatized sexual practices may endanger the importance of network solidarity and a broader sense of belonging. In other words, it is possible to question whether this experience of solidarity

[4] Historically, this label contributed to the production of the stereotype of the poor black migrant man living in Italy, neglecting the situations of high-skilled migrants or those having different socio-legal status and positionalities (Kaag, 2013).

[5] This mutual solidarity expressed by migrant communities abroad and the role carried out by associations and other national institutions has been highlighted in many other national groups. For example, see Werbner (2002) and Qureshi (2016).

and support is expressed also towards people demonstrating sexual behaviours that are viewed negatively by official precepts of Islam.

5. Methodology

Considering what has been said about the risks of conducting and participating in an investigation centred on a stigmatized topic, this section aims to show how ethnographic fieldwork may unveil noteworthy aspects related to the links between migratory experiences, gender issues and religious beliefs. Because non-heteronormative genders and sexualities are currently criminalized in Senegal, the acknowledgement that the research could endanger both me and the participants has been a constant reference point.

I decided to focus on one of the most relevant sub-Saharan African communities in Italy (Senegalese people) in order to activate a transnational perspective (Levitt, Jaworsky, 2007) and look at the intersections of blackness, queerness and minority religious faith. Taking into account the prevalence of men within this national group, the research was conceived as a fieldwork on the transnational construction of non-heteronormative masculinities of Senegalese men living in Italy. I have followed the advice given by Moore (1993), who highlighted the importance of considering the various gender positionalities that exist among women and men[6], and by Rubin (2002), who explicitly called for investigations to also address sexuality and sexual practices, instead of indirectly deducting them from gender roles and expressions. Moreover, my source of inspiration has been the rising field of queer anthropology (Manalansan, 2016). This theoretical framework has been useful for shedding light on the experiences of a minority (MSM) within a minority (Senegalese migrants in Italy).

This ethnographic research was carried out between 2015 and 2017, relying on a multi-sited approach between urban and rural settings in northern Italy and two urban settings in Senegal (Marcus, 1995; Coleman, von Hellerman, 2010) in order to navigate the transnational implications related to the mutual construction of gender, migratory experience and religious beliefs[7]. The purpose was to explore how the participants were able to maintain, redefine or challenge their transnational bonds and feelings of belonging to various communities: society of migration, homeland and the migrant community abroad (Anthias, 2002). These aspects could be relevant also to understand the ways in which they express their sexualities and how they perceive themselves as men performing alternative models of masculinity. On the other hand, this article provides examples of how religious affiliations intersect gendered practices. Non-academic narratives and institutional discourses related to NGOs usually

[6] In a completely different context, similar research questions were deployed by Osella and Osella (2006) in their research on the meanings of masculinity in Kerala (India) and the precarious situations that can endanger or foster it.

[7] Due to the high sensitiveness of the topic and the risks of endangering participants, I prefer not to provide the exact names of the places in which the research was carried out. Informants' names have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

portray Muslim newcomers as isolated victims of an intolerant society, most of the time affected by «internalized homophobia» (Giametta, 2014).

Considering the profile of the participants, I have been in touch with approximately thirty Senegalese men of different ages (between nineteen and forty-five years old), socio-legal status (long-term migrants, people arrived through family reunification, newcomers, asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented), class (middle-high, middle, and poor) and geographic background (northern, central, southern towns/villages in Senegal). All the participants were raised as Muslim; none of them had been baptised Christian.

For ethical reasons, I declared my positionality of ethnographer to them from the beginning and none of the participants was recruited under payment or was selected through a covert ethnography. However, only half of them actively participated in all the phases of the research. The study's relation to (homo)sexuality was a source of potential misunderstanding regarding my positionality and my reasons for investigating such a neglected topic (including supposed hidden interests beyond the research)[8]. Having clarified this aspect, some potential participants and informants spontaneously decided not to take part in the research, while others appreciated the transparency and contributed to it. Gender, body, age, class, nationality, sexuality and emotions were part of the ethnography – a matter disregarded by much fieldwork since the time of Malinowski (1967) – and therefore it was important to maintain a reflexive attitude (Fia#kowska, 2019). I was constantly aware of the power dynamics embedded in ethnographic encounters and how specific settings could influence the views proposed by the Senegalese people I met, particularly when taking into consideration the privileges intrinsic to my role and positionality. However, there were times in which certain aspects of my subjectivity and personal background created an unexpected field of communication and fostered the discussion of specific experiences. For most of the participants, the establishment of a trusting relationship required time. Some follow-up interviews arrived many months after the first encounters and required a constant caring for their precious contacts. Then again, the awareness that interviews on sensitive topics could produce complaisant responses was the main reason for choosing an ethnographic approach. Relying on several meetings, informal conversations, diary notes and observations created the conditions necessary to explore the complexities, the ambivalences and the nuances related to the participants' lives, narratives, and practices.

In the following paragraphs, I present four very different stories in an attempt to highlight various intersections of migratory experiences, gender and sexual expressions, as well as religious beliefs and sense of belonging.

[8] Something similar was reported in the literature talking explicitly about sexuality (Kulick, Wilson, 1995).

6. Results

6.1. The double life as a tactic to maintain transnational and local bonds

The first participant who concretely explains the intersections and the complexities mentioned above, is Ibrahima, a man approximately forty years old at the time of the fieldwork. After a few years spent in France in the early 2000s, he settled in a small village in northern Italy, where he currently lives with a relative and another compatriot. During one of our first meetings, he told me:

> «I'm married in Senegal. I'm a father of two children of four and seven years. My wife doesn't know what I do here, nobody knows. Some years ago, I started to date other men for sex in Italy, but […] I don't have a lot of time, I can't meet guys more than one or two times every month» (Ibrahima).

During the conversation, I was surprised at Ibrahima's willingness to disclose such personal information. Although we did not know each other very well, he mentioned that he had started to date men only after his arrival in Italy. He had these sexual experiences not simply because of the absence of his wife, but out of curiosity and then for pleasure. However, in another meeting, Ibrahima sincerely admitted that the temporary separation from his wife and children facilitated these sexual encounters. Initially this information was in contrast with my expectation that he would be a single man, but then I was curious as to how he managed to navigate such complex transnational circumstances. Indeed, the literature on transnational heterosexual parenthood is extensive (Pessar, Mahler, 2003), but I found no references to situations like Ibrahima's.

I tried to understand whether these limited experiences with men could be the consequence of an involvement with compatriot networks in his territory. Unsurprisingly this was the case, as he said that he sometimes joined public events organized by the local Senegalese community. The element of secrecy somehow enabled his engagement. Similarly, he never mentioned a troublesome relationship or doubts about being Muslim while having homoerotic experiences with men.

During another interview in his house, Ibrahima said that he preferred having sexual encounters only when he was certain that his flatmates were out, either on holiday, or at work. Moreover, he briefly mentioned a younger man he had dated some years earlier and his preoccupation of attracting too much attention from the Senegalese community in Italy due to his partner's gender expression, which he considered to be too «feminine». In this conversation, Ibrahima demonstrated he was conscious that simply dating a man with an alternative gender expression could be a shadow on his marriage and fatherhood. In another meeting, we discussed what happens when he goes back home:

> «In Senegal I avoid dating other men for security reasons. I have a couple of gay friends there. One is married like me, but is going to divorce, I guess. […]

> However, my desire is to obtain a visa for my wife. I have a regular job contract in Italy and a long-term permit to reside, so I can request a family reunification visa. Then I would like to start another business here and in Germany, exactly like another friend of mine» (Ibrahima).

In this narrative, Ibrahima connects the reasons for avoiding dates with men in Senegal and two of his priorities: obtaining family reunification and pursuing a specific business. While the first objective refers to the desire to maintain significant social bonds with his family (emotional and symbolic dimension), the second emphasizes the importance of acting strategically with the intention of improving their socio-economic condition (socio-economic dimension). Consequently, this mindset confirms the gendered expectations related to his status of male migrant and entrepreneur in Italy (Mondain *et al.*, 2013; Sinatti, 2014). Simultaneously, he provides some justifications for why he avoids such experiences in Senegal, and why only in Italy he feels safe for experimenting his sexuality with men. He performs his sexuality differently depending on the context, considering also the socio-political climate and the cultural-religious expectations specific to the two national contexts.

6.2. Go along with social expectations as a tactic to postpone social pressure

The relevance of bonds with compatriots living in Italy and the influence of family members emerged also when speaking with other participants. For instance, Oumar, a thirty-five-year-old unemployed man, in a romantic relationship with an older Italian man, avoids attending Senegalese associations and networks because they express negative judgments towards lifestyles considered «against Islam» and «against Senegalese culture»:

> «In Italy I do not meet other Senegalese people, apart from a family that I used to visit sometimes. It is difficult to have confidence in my compatriots for a simple reason: they talk too much, they are always ready to judge a compatriot even though they don't know him well. [...] Even when I went to visit this Senegalese family, they asked me every time: "when do you marry? Because we want to organize a big wedding party for you". I always replied saying that when I will find a good woman, I will marry and I will have a lot of children» (Oumar).

Interestingly, to avoid doubts concerning his sexuality and to reduce the pressure to marry, Oumar confirms his interest in arranging a marriage and becoming a father, two aspects that are considered socially and religiously important, both for his relatives and the Senegalese family he is in touch with. Some months after this conversation, Oumar told me that he was going to marry a younger woman living in Senegal. I was surprised at this piece of news, because in the previous months Oumar was considering establishing a civil partnership with his Italian male partner. Once he revealed this new intention to me, I real-

ized that his goal was probably to reduce the social pressure to marry and the impossibility to carry on postponing the event, especially considering his age. However, after his return from Senegal, in spring 2017, Oumar explained that he had not married, because he did not consider that woman to be the right person for him. In so doing, he gave in to pressures coming from different directions (his household in Senegal and his Senegalese compatriots in Italy) and temporarily pushed away doubts related to his inability to conform to a specific model of masculinity that is deeply linked to fatherhood.

6.3. Selectivity and ambivalence as a form of protection

Cherif, a twenty-nine-year-old worker provides another interesting example of these complex intersections of individual choices and collective responsibilities. I met him through a refugee who used to know him when they lived in the same town. After asking Cherif about the possibility of being contacted via mobile phone, this mediator gave me Cherif's number saying that his name was Gorgui. Once I wrote to Gorgui, he told me he had a different name, neither Cherif nor Gorgui. When I first met him, in the town where he used to work, he finally introduced himself using his real name. I wrote this strange experience in my field diary, labelling Cherif as «the guy with four names».

Understanding the reasons behind such discretion required time. At the time, Cherif was living with his Italian partner, but in previous years, he had lived in another region. This meant that he could be potentially in touch with other people who had participated in my research. After a period of approximately one year, during which we developed a trusting relationship, Cherif invited me for a drink in a relatively popular queer-friendly café, probably to show that he could feel at ease even in a place like that. He was fully aware that it was impossible to coincidentally meet somebody there (maybe a compatriot) that late afternoon. The fact that the café was relatively empty probably facilitated the mood of our conversation. Talking about his forthcoming temporary return to Senegal, he asked me to put myself in his shoes and give him my advice:

> «My mother said that when I return to Senegal, I have to marry… I don't know how to tell her, actually I can't, you know why. She expects that I marry and have children with this girl[9], but I don't want. I really don't want to explain why, she would understand everything» (Cherif).

Cherif decided to share his feelings about what he was experiencing and his desire to not betray his religious and family expectations. The literature on transnational migrations highlights clearly that the household's socio-economic investment to enable their relative's journey abroad may increase some of these pressures (Levitt, Jaworsky, 2007; Prothmann, 2017), especially towards unmarried men living abroad for a long time (Sinatti, 2014; Prothmann, 2017).

[9] A woman his mother proposed to him.

Cherif was faced with the risks of endangering primary social bonds that he considered vital. For a long time, he was able to maintain contacts with his mother and simultaneously establish satisfactory experiences with men in Italy. This request complicated his precarious but coherent identity and the stability of his relationship. Suddenly, he could no longer negotiate the date of his marriage and the confirmation of religious expectations related to it.

6.4. Contexts matter: how engagement may change over time and space

One participant who contributed greatly to the research provided concrete examples of how Senegalese transnational migrants develop creative tactics through which they selectively adopt specific behaviours and navigate a range of contexts with consciousness and flexibility. Demba is a twenty-six-year-old worker living in a small and isolated village in the north of Italy, but he is the only one of my interviewees with the privilege of living alone. He said that he had arrived in Italy a few years earlier thanks to a family reunification requested by his father. As the eldest son, once he had resettled in Italy many expectations were placed on him, even though they would not be met. After some months he started attending a bar that his father associated with bad practices (such as drinking alcohol, engaging in sexual experiences before marriage, etc.) and this dramatically altered their relationship. Abruptly, his father rejected him and told him to leave the house. When his father retired and returned to Senegal for an undefined time, Demba remained alone in Italy and decided to keep in touch with some Italian friends rather than with Senegalese compatriots. Interestingly, at that time Demba used to say that he did not have contacts with other gay or bisexual Senegalese people living in Italy, but within a few months, the situation had completely changed. He had the chance to meet three other Senegalese men who had interests towards other men, living not far from him. Thanks to these friendships, Demba was able to access some information that became crucial to his life in Italy, but also during his return to Senegal after his six-year stay in Italy. One of these men (Khalifa) was only a couple of years older than him. He explained to Demba how to navigate the *milieu branché* (the hidden queer-friendly subculture in Senegal) during his vacation back home. After his return to Italy, Demba enthusiastically shared with me his memories of an environment he had been too young to know when he had lived in Senegal. He informed me of the new words he had learned, commonly understood only within the *milieu branché*, invented by this minority in order to remain safe and avoid attracting too much attention from the local authorities. For a long time, Demba did not have access to this vocabulary that could potentially have mitigated the negative judgements he was usually faced with. These experiences contributed to establishing a new perspective also on Senegal, that was no longer associated only with backwardness and homophobia. In fact, the following year Demba decided to undertake Ramadan after years during which he had not considered the idea, offering an example of his ability to reconcile

sexuality and faith, which he no longer considered to be necessarily opposed to one another.

Through Demba's experience, I learned to consider how time and space can affect and change positionalities, throughout life. Moreover, I had confirmation that specific skills are required in order to navigate through various spaces and troublesome relationships. However, he frequently stressed also the necessity to remain vigilant when sharing personal information with other people, even if they are friends involved with, or considered part of the queer community:

> «The problem is that Serigne and Cherif[10] talk with Khalifa every day after he finished the prayer in the early morning. I'm quite confident that if I say something to Cherif, then he reports it to Khalifa, or that if I tell something to Khalifa, he shares it with Serigne. It happened that immediately after my return from Senegal, I met a Senegalese guy called Laye. When I said it to Khalifa, he already knew it, even though I didn't share this information with anybody, it's incredible! [...] Khalifa knows always everything about everybody» (Demba).

7. Final remarks

This article focuses on the experiences of some Senegalese men expressing non-heteronormative masculinities and sexualities. These men take into account the possibility of facing stigmatizing attitudes in highly heteronormative contexts, both in Senegal and in Italy. The experiences described above are heterogeneous, so it is important to avoid generalization. The four stories briefly discussed offer examples of how these men are able to navigate the complexity of interconnections of migratory experiences, non-heteronormative sexualities and religious beliefs. Their life experiences require continual vigilance and creative adaptation of social ties, both locally and transnationally. In some negative judgements that they may encounter, religious institutions and charismatic leaders frequently play an important role, both in Senegal and Italy. Dominant viewpoints exclude those engaging in homoerotic acts from being considered «good Muslim believers». For this reason, Senegalese MSM decide to what extent they are able to tolerate these attitudes when they are involved in situations and places where they are in touch with compatriots. They may perceive religious networks as dangerous places where they feel unwelcome. This reality meant that that most of my interviewees carried out their religious practices in a more private than public manner. This is in line with prior reports in the literature regarding queer Muslim migrants in other national contexts (Yip, Nynäs, 2012; Giametta, 2014; Peumans, 2016). In addition, considering the important role of long-term migrants for newcomers, stigmatizing messages towards homosexuality may discourage their participation in Senegalese associations in Italy, but not necessarily with their relatives back home. However, as reported by other scholars (Giametta, 2014; Peumans, 2016), there are also alternative positions proposing a less stigmatizing view of same-sex relationships. These alternative

[10] Two of Demba's friends.

views suggest queering religious interpretations, because also Islam cannot be considered a homophobic religion *per se* (Yip, Nynäs, 2012). The existence of negative attitudes does not produce a rejection of religion, but it stimulates alternative ways of practising it.

While some participants like Ibrahima opt to conduct a double life, others like Oumar and Cherif choose temporary strategies that minimize or inhibit the development of problems with the Senegalese community and their households. For both Ibrahima and Cherif, it is necessary to avoid the potential perceived contradictions and conflicts between personal trajectories, social bonds and religious norms. However, while Ibrahima prefers to maintain strong contacts with Senegalese people also in Italy, Cherif makes a completely different choice, even though this does not mean that he perceives himself as an outcast or has no interest in meeting his family's and religious expectations. In contrast, Demba shows a completely different story that complicates the idea that a man having sexual experiences with other men is not able to reconcile his sexuality with being a Muslim believer, and that the prejudice of only a supposedly safer context (Italy) can contribute to the expression of a genuine non-heteronormative sexuality.

The research participants did not emphasize ideas about the supposed incompatibility of being Muslim while at the same time having love affairs with men. In fact, they have creatively developed their feeling of belonging to Islam and Senegal, as well as to Italian society. The research highlights how non-heteronormative sexual behaviours and Islamic faith are arranged in the everyday experiences of Senegalese migrants performing a subaltern model of masculinity. In fact, none of the participants declared to be atheist or considered the possibility of converting to Christianity as an exit strategy to avoid religious condemnation. As noted by Giametta (2014) and Peumans (2016), they instead carry out their religious life in a more individualized and private manner than in a public and collective dimension. However, many participants demonstrated to be conscious of the problems of legitimating lifestyles that they imagined being not accepted by their compatriots in Italy and in Senegal. These situations require creative ways to handle genders, sexualities and religious affiliations. As suggested by the literature, the main solutions adopted are coping with tensions and conflicts, compartmentalizing identity layers, and accommodating complex situations (Giametta, 2014).

The article highlights the necessity to develop an intersectional vision to grasp the flexible positionalities that they occupied in the transnational arena (Sinatti, 2014) and adopt an ethnographic approach to explore the complexity and supposed ambiguity related to particular narratives and behaviours. On the other hand, certain choices may even redefine the assigned role in the diaspora and its consequent expectations. In fact, both the possibility and impossibility to satisfy social and religious expectations may contribute to negotiating some social expectations coming from both the households and the compatriots. The fieldwork illustrates how Senegalese migrants dating other men in Italy and Senegal are strategically and creatively able to conform to, or challenge normative gender and sexual roles, relying on the Senegalese principle of *sutura*

(Oudenhuijsen, 2021). Many of their choices depend on the contexts in which they find themselves and the people they are directly or indirectly connected to.

In conclusion, this article shows how participants did not express views and behaviours that would limit their subjectivities and migratory trajectories into paths constructed as alternatives (to be straight and believe in God, or to be gay/bisexual and not be religious). On the contrary, they creatively managed and combined aspects and positions that are potentially not easy to reconcile, challenging many boundaries that continuously enclose them. Their transnational trajectories do not frame their experiences in a unilinear way, in which feeling safe or welcome is necessarily associated with Italy. Predictably, some participants (for instance Demba) felt empowered once they got access to new words developed in the *milieu*, which allowed them to reconsider their sexual preferences in a less negative light. These achievements sometimes relate to Senegal, other times to Italy. The impossibility to automatically associate with Europe a «progressive» attitude about non-heteronormative sexualities challenges the Western dominant narratives centred on the culturalization of homophobia (Giametta, 2014). This reconfiguration of spaces, roles and times should remind us to recognize the influence of information circulating globally and the subjective ways in which they are adopted by individuals and groups (Appadurai, 1996). For this reason, queering ethnography is a useful exercise through which recognizing that «sexuality is disciplined by social institutions and practices that normalize and naturalize heterosexuality and heterosexual practices including marriage, family, and biological reproduction by marginalizing persons, institutions, or practices that deviate from these norms» (Manalansan, 2006, p. 225).

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